

Political Benefits Outweigh Socio-economic Losses: A Study from Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the emerging economies of the world with more than 160 million population. Since the state is run under democracy, political decision of the ruling party is an important element that determines the level of economic development. Present regime of Bangladesh led by Prime Minister Sheik Hasina for last 6 years (2009-2014) has been entitled with a number of economic losses incurred from political decision. One of the major political agenda of the current government is to punish the liberation war criminals. The study aims to analyze the socio-economic outcomes of the major political agendum of the current Awami League Government. Using secondary data from various published sources, the study reveals that the explicit financial expenditure behind the punishment of war criminals are not returned in cash. Moreover, it incurs loss of more than 500 lives during this period. Some other economic losses include- decline in GDP growth, fall in overseas employment and remittance flow, prevailing uncertainty in the economy and widespread corruption. One of the major opposite parties frequently observes countrywide strike to step down the activities of War Crime Tribunal. Such movement results losses of income in tourism industry, transportation as well as marginalized people of the society. Further, political unrest hampers the image of the country across the globe and the potential buyers become reluctant to purchase Bangladeshi products. However, only advantage of such political agenda is to derive psychic benefit by the supporters of party in power, metal relief received by the family member of victims in 1971 liberation war. Thus the study concludes, political interest outweigh the socio-economic losses in a developing country like Bangladesh.

Keywords: Political Agenda, Economic Loss, War Criminal, Economic Benefit, Awami League

Introduction

Bangladesh is appeared a booming economy in the world. According to the World Bank, Bangladesh will be stronger economy than any other European economy by 2030. However, the present war crime issue and its consequences with political unrest and revenge between political parties will hamper this economic growth (Jewel, 2012). Since the state is run under democracy, political decision of the party in power is an important element that determines the level of economic growth. Present regime of Bangladesh led by Prime Minister Sheik Hasina for last 6 years (2009-2014) has been cursed by a number of economic losses incurred from political decision. One of the major political agenda of the current government is to punish the liberation war criminals.

Since 2000, there has been an increasing demand in Bangladesh for justice related to war crimes committed during the 1971 liberation war; the issue was central in 9th parliamentary election. The Awami League-led, 14-party Grand Alliance included this issue in its election manifesto. Its opponent, four-party alliance (which included the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami) had several leaders accused to have committed war crimes. The Grand Alliance won the election (held on 29 December 2008) with a two-thirds majority, based in part on its promise to prosecute alleged war criminals (Julhas Alam, 2011). On 29 January 2009 the new Parliament unanimously passed a resolution to prosecute war criminals. The government intended to use the 1973 law: the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act. The government worked to amend the law, updating it and incorporating other nations' experience. The amendments provided for the trial of individuals and political parties that had worked against the liberation of Bangladesh. The government was empowered to appeal tribunal decisions.

However, since the beginning of the trials several human rights organizations and international legal figures have raised objections to the court proceedings. Human Rights Watch, which initially supported the establishment of the tribunal, have criticized it for issues of fairness and transparency, as well as reported harassment of lawyers and witnesses representing the accused (Adams, 2011).

From the economic point of view, the objectives of any public policy is either to ensure economic growth, generate employment and control the general price level (Arnold, 2005). The political agenda of death sentence of war criminals also intends to ensure public welfare. However, studies shows that there are losses incurred from verdicts of war crime tribunal. As a result, it become an important question how the government of Bangladesh rationalizes its economic losses due to the punishment of war criminals.

The present study aims to explore the socio-economic losses incurred from the establishment of war

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crime tribunal in Bangladesh. It also aims to know how the political benefits outweigh the losses. Using secondary data from various published sources, the study goes through a brief description of International Crimes Tribunal in Bangladesh followed by the political activities during 2009-2014. The findings of the study presented in graphs, figures and analysis by the authors. It tried to make a conclusion on how economic returns are measured in political benefits in case of Bangladesh. From economic view point, no political decision taken by the party in power can incur net loss for the economy as a whole. Net value of the outcomes must be positive to make it a rational decision.

International Crimes Tribunal (Bangladesh)

The International War Crimes Tribunal (IWCT) is a home institution of Bangladesh established in 2009 to punish those responsible for genocide in liberation war 1971. In 2008 during general election Awami League pledge to arrest liberation war criminals and bring them under decision. The first condemnations were issued in 2010. The government set up the tribunal after the Awami League won the general election in December 2008 with more than two-thirds majority in parliament.

The War Crimes Fact Finding Committee, tasked to investigate and find evidence, completed its report in 2008, identifying 1600 suspects. Prior to the formation of the ICT, the United Nations Development Programme offered support in 2009 on the tribunal's formation (D'Costa and Bina, 2010). In 2009 the parliament amended the 1973 act that authorized such a tribunal to update it.

By 2012, nine leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party in the nation, and two of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), had been indicted as suspects in war crimes. Three leaders of Jamaat were the first tried; each were convicted of several charges of war crimes. The first person convicted was Abul Kalam Azad (Bachchu), tried in absentia as he had left the country; he was sentenced to death in January 2013.

The ICT received some support internationally and the UN initially attempted to offer limited support with the planning (Haq, M. Zahurul (2011). The EU has passed three resolutions supporting the trials and Jean Lambert has said "she expected that the trial would conform to the highest standard possible." (Ullah, 2012).

However, since the beginning of the trials several human rights organizations and international legal figures have raised objections to the court proceedings. Human Rights Watch, which initially supported the establishment of the tribunal, have criticized it for issues of fairness and transparency, as well as reported harassment of lawyers and witnesses representing the accused (Adam, 2011). Bianca Karim and Tirza Theunissen have written that the international community have voiced concerns that the trial will not be transparent or unbiased (Karim and Tirza, 2011).

Jamaat-e-Islami supporters and their student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir, called a general strike (Hartal) nationwide on December 4, 2012, which erupted in violence. They have demanded the tribunal be scrapped permanently and their leaders be released instantaneously.

After Abdul Quader Molla, assistant secretary general of Jamaat, was convicted in February 2013 and sentenced to life imprisonment rather than capital punishment, a peaceful demonstration started at Shahbag intersection in Dhaka. Tens of thousands of mostly young demonstrators, including women, have called for the death penalty for those convicted of war crimes. Non-violent protests supporting this position have occurred in other cities as the country closely follows the trials.

Political Situation of Bangladesh (2009-2014)

During 2009, the political situation was almost normal in Bangladesh. Awami League started its rule facing the then Bangladesh Rifles' mutiny that took lives of 74 army officers in February, 2009. Mutinous Bangladeshi border guards opened fire at their headquarters in the capital and seized a nearby shopping mall, injuring several people in an insurrection apparently sparked by pay disputes. They agreed to surrender after the government said it would grant them amnesty.

In March 25 2010, Bangladesh set up a war crimes tribunal for long-delayed trials of people accused of murder, torture, rape and arson during its 1971 independence war. While in October 3, 2010, Delwar Hossain Sayedee, a senior leader from the largest Islamic party, was charged with war crimes for allegedly leading groups that took part in killing, looting, arson and rape during the country's 1971 independence war against Pakistan. In December 10, 2012 it was reported that a Bangladesh war crimes tribunal has accused The Economist magazine of hacking the computer of its presiding judge to record conversations and read e-mails he exchanged with a lawyer regarding charges related to its 1971 war of independence. The tribunal sentenced Abul Kalam Azad to death in absentia for genocide and murder committed during its 9-month war in 1971 in Jan 21, 2013.

After the verdict of Delwar Hossain Sayedee, protesters clashed for a day as the death toll rose to 88 in violence triggered. Police, RAB and other law enforcing agencies started killing across the country. In a press conference in March, Begum Khaleda Zia, the leader of the opposition termed such killing as 'Genocide' (The Daily Star, 2013).

After that 1st October 2013 the tribunal sentenced to death a top opposition MP for genocide. Salauddin Quader Chowdhury became the first lawmaker to be convicted of war crimes during the 1971 war of independence. Afterward death sentence of Salauddin Quader Chowdhury on 3rd November 2013 A Bangladesh war crimes court convicted and sentenced to death in absentia two men accused of committing atrocities during the country's war of independence from Pakistan in 1971. Britain-based Muslim leader Chowdhury Mueen Uddin and Ashrafuzzaman Khan, a US citizen, were found guilty of the torture and murder of 18 intellectuals during the war. On December 12, 2013 Bangladesh's Supreme Court cleared the way for the execution of Abdul Quader Molla, an opposition leader convicted of war crimes, As a result, on December 13, 2013 Bangladesh was rocked by a new wave of deadly violence as Islamist supporters went on the rampage to vent their fury at the execution of Abdul Quader Molla for war crimes. 3 protesters were killed. 6 more people were killed and 7 overnight in continuing protests sparked by the execution of top Islamist leader Abdul Quader Molla.

On January 31, 2014, Matiur Rahman Nizami, leader of Bangladesh's main Islamist opposition party, is among 14 people convicted and sentenced to death for smuggling weapons to rebel group in India in 2004. While on September 18 in 2014, Bangladesh's Supreme Court commutes death sentence of Islamist political leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee, who was convicted in 2013 of war crimes during nation's 1971 war for independence. On November 25 in 2014, the special tribunal in Bangladesh convicts Mubarak Hossain for slaying 33 civilians during Bangladesh's 1971 independence war; sentences him to death for his role in mass killings.

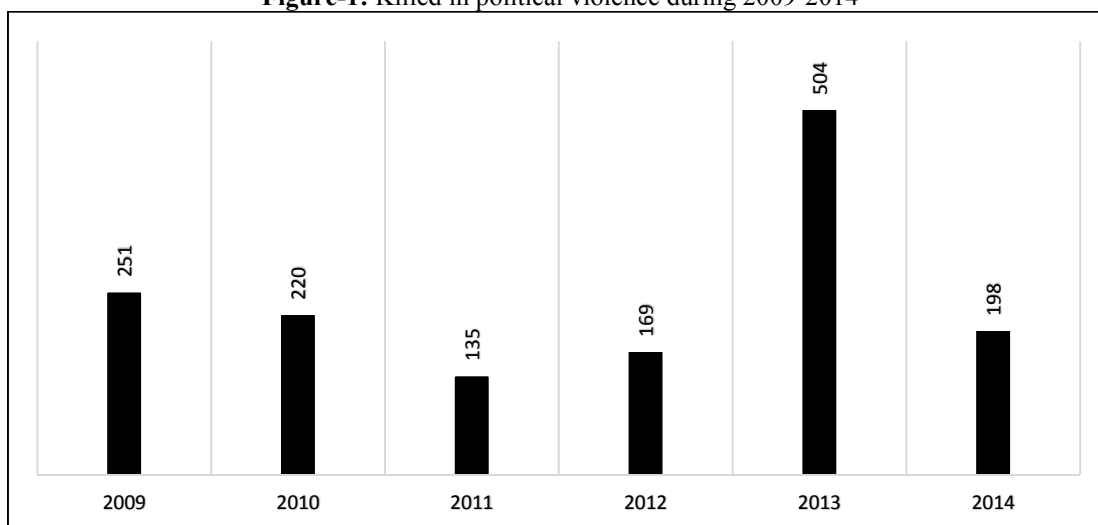
Loss of Lives

Political agitation increased as the leaders of opposition were convicted by IWCT after 2009. Hartal and other protests started countrywide and the law enforcing agencies played their role to control the movement. Moreover, the ruling party supporters also came on the road and started violence in various places of the country. Further, the law enforcing agencies have been killing political activists in the name of 'Crossfire'. Basically, crossfire is a form of extra-judicial killing. People are arrested by law enforcing agencies in a regular basis and send some of them to the court and rest are killed in crossfire.

Last 8 years in Bangladesh, the law enforcing agency specially Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) since its inception discharging its duty as not only an enforcing agency but an executing agency also who perhaps not believe in the legal system of the country in exist. Recapping the incidents in the recent past that after any death due to crossfire the RAB by releasing press note has been firmly disclosing that after arresting any criminal while the RAB along with that person went to recover arms all on a sudden the associated criminals begin fire and on safety reason when RAB opens fire only the person who already arrested has been died and no body from the other side or from the RAB injured or died and at the same time RAB disclosed a series number of criminal cases pending against the person dead (Nuruzzam, 2012).

Figure-1 shows the number of people killed in political violence in Bangladesh during last 6 years. In most of the violence, pro Jamat-Shibir peoples were killed. In February, 2013 when the first death sentence of top Jamat leader Saydee was declared, a series of violence sparked out all over the country. Some other Jamat leaders were convicted in this year followed by execution of Abdul Qader Mollah, another top Jamat leader. The year 2013 was the most violent year during the present regime of Awami League. There was a total of 45 nationwide hartal and 170 regional hartal in 2013 which was highest among the years during the present regime. In order to prevent the anti-tribunal movement, law enforcing agencies started shooting the protesters and ruling party supporters also joined the battle. Consequently, death toll risen it peak.

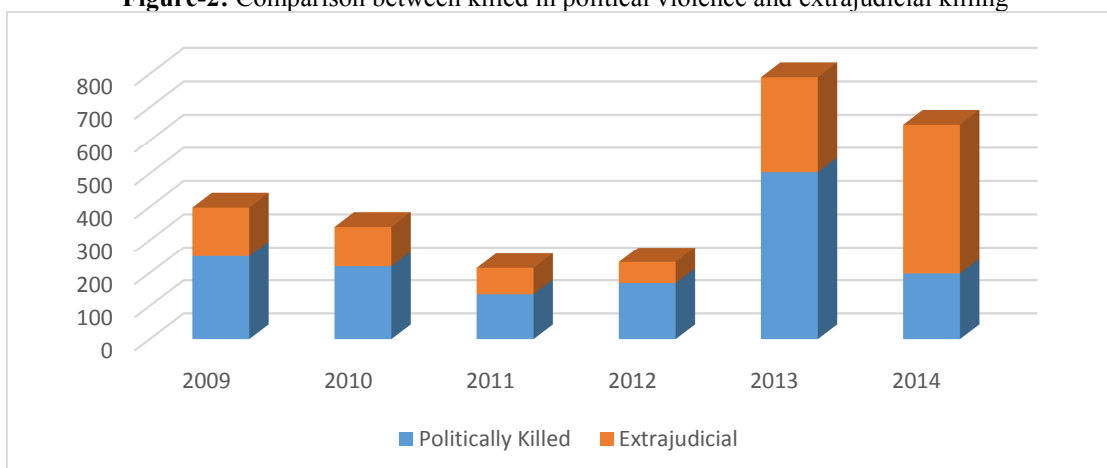
Figure-1: Killed in political violence during 2009-2014



Source: Odhikar, 2015

Apart from political violence, the number of people killed by law enforcing agencies including RAB continued in the name of ‘crossfire’. Figure-2 depicts a comparison between people killed in political violence and in extrajudicial killing by law enforcing agencies. In 2013, number of politically killed was more than 500 and extrajudicial killing was nearly 300. The number of killing in political violence declined in 2014 but the extrajudicial killing was continued to increase and around four and half hundred people were died.

Figure-2: Comparison between killed in political violence and extrajudicial killing

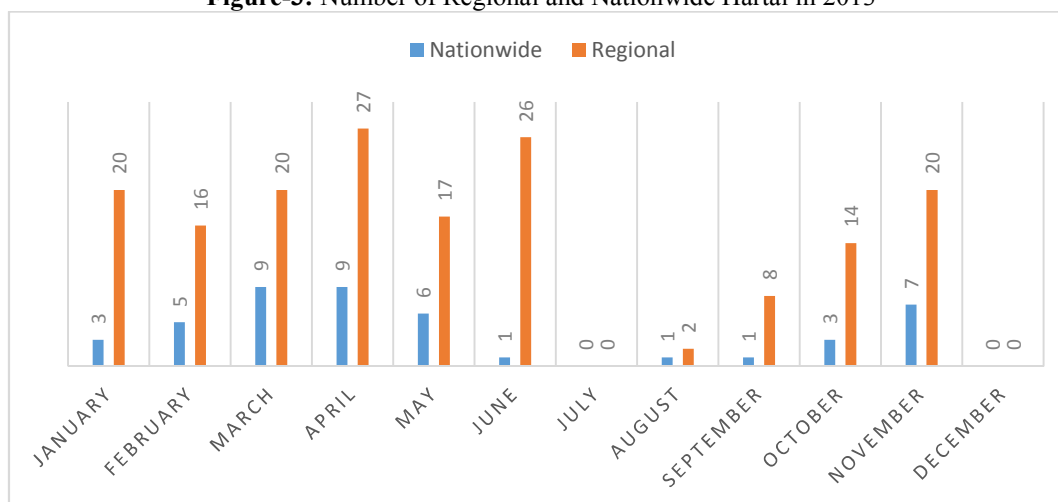


Source: Odhikar, 2015

Economic Loss Incurred from Anti-tribunal Movement

Top leaders from Jamat-e-Islami were arrested by the law enforcing agencies in 2010. Since then, the supporters of the party started countrywide protest. They called for hartal (strike) both nationwide as well as countrywide. According to various statistics, one day hartal costs Tk. 1500 crore (\$ 19276 crore) in Bangladesh (CPD, 2011). In 2013, the most violent year, a total of 45 nationwide hartal costs \$ 867420 which is 2.67% of the GDP. The explicit public budget data which is spend for IWCT is not available. The total explicit and implicit cost of IWCT could be much higher.

Figure-3: Number of Regional and Nationwide Hartal in 2013



Source: Odhikar

Figure-3 shows the number of hartal observed during 2013. There was a total of 45 nationwide hartal and 170 regional hartal. Exporters are incurring losses as they cannot make shipment of goods due to shut down and road blockade. Prices of vegetables, eggs and meat soared recently due to political strikes. Frequent shutdowns have snapped the supply chain. All items are becoming costlier. The ongoing political unrest may dent the country ratings (Jamaluddin, 2012)

Apart from economic costs, there are social, mental costs. Studies on the impacts on hartal on marginalized people reveals that,

On an average, among marginalized person of Dhaka city 69 per cent of them have incurred income loss/damage of their properties due to hartal. The main reason of income loss is due to the shut down and income decrease due to hartal (66 per cent). While in normal times, a respondent would work 10-12 hours, during hartal, their average daily work is halved, and consequently, earning drops by average 60 per cent (Murshed, 2000).

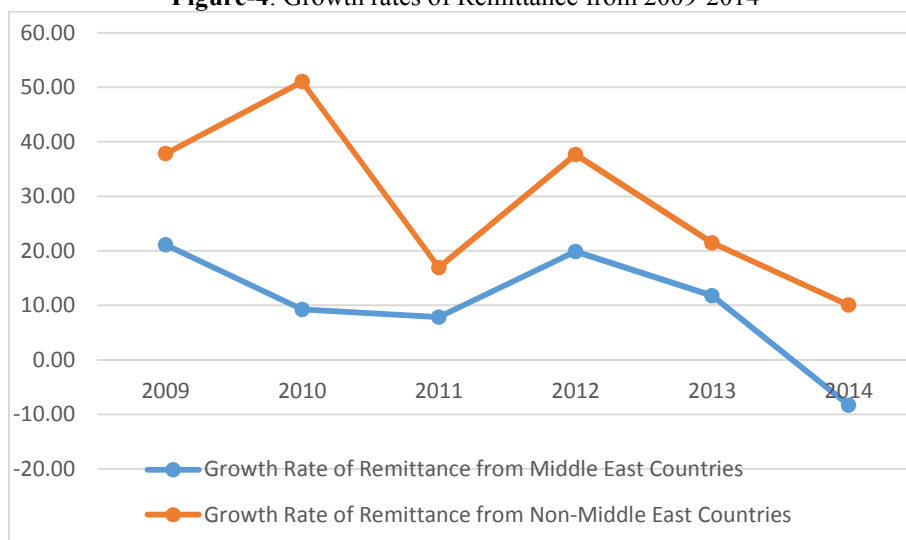
Loss of Overseas Employment and Income

Saudi Arabia recruited about 150,000 Bangladeshis each year until 2008 (Bdnews24, 2015). It silently disapproves of the imminent hangings of the leadership of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the religious party that serves as a standard-bearer for its strand of Islam in Bangladesh. It grudgingly recognized Bangladesh as an independent country only after the assassination of the country's first Prime Minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975. Sheikh Mujib is revered by his countrymen for having won the independence of Bangladesh, or East Pakistan, from what had been West Pakistan, in 1971. His death paved the way for the return of religion-based parties, which had been banned by Bangladesh's 1972 constitution (Banyan, 2013).

The current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who is Sheikh Mujib's daughter, has brought back an explicitly secular constitution under which religious politics has no space. It will not have escaped the Saudis' notice that Bangladesh's foreign minister likened the Jamaat, a close ally of theirs, to a terrorist organization in a briefing with diplomats in Dhaka on March 7th. (Her office forwarded it along to journalists the same day.) Meanwhile, Sheikh Hasina's government is weighing whether it ought to go the whole distance and ban the Jamaat (Banyan, 2013).

Figure-4 illustrates how the growth rate of remittance declined during the current regime in Bangladesh. One of the major sources of foreign exchange reserve is remittance. Apparently, there might be some other variables that affected growth of remittance. But the issue of accusing Jamat leaders in war crime pushed some Middle East countries backward. Eventually, the overseas employment in the Middle East countries as well as remittance from these countries declined.

Figure-4: Growth rates of Remittance from 2009-2014



Source: Bangladesh Bank

Other Losses Incurred from ICT

There are explicit cost of ICT- the public budget allocation for the judges, prosecutors, lawyers and other staffs. The loss of lives mentioned above are the loss of human capital. Among the persons killed, there were nearly 100 students who could be potential human capital in the future. Since the law enforcing agencies killed without any judgment, there might be some innocent people. The psychic loss of the victims' families, their mental agony, the loss of social capital and social network need to be counted in the implicit costs. Among the people died, there were some people who were the earning members of their families. But after the death, the family members and the innocent babies became helpless.

Due to hartal and other political unrests, an uncertainty prevails all over the economy. The tourism industry and the transport sector of the economy suffered much. During the unrest periods, nobody plans for a tour. Millions of people work in the transport and tourism sector. But the political unrest reduces their income and thus living standard.

One of the losses of political unrest is the loss of image in the rest of the world. One of the leading export earning sectors of the economy is RMG sector. During the political calamities, the foreign buyers become reluctant to buy the Bangladeshi product, shipment delayed. The nation faces severe loss of image in the rest of the world while hartal, strike, killing etc. are going on at home.

Benefit of International War Crime Tribunal (ICT)

Visibly the ICT is not irrational from a social perspective. It tried to sentence the war criminals as it was the demand of millions for decades. The family members of 1971 victims derive psychic benefit that is impossible to count in terms of number or any nominal figure. The Vice-Chancellor of University of Dhaka Arefin Siddique at Shahbag square while hundreds of thousands of young protesters gatherer and claimed death sentence of Jamat leader Quader Mollah instead of life imprisonment, said, "Today is a movement to make the country free from razakars" (The Financial Express, 2013). It revives the spirit of liberation war in 1971 among the new generations. In Bangladesh it is found that hundreds of people gathered in public place and distribute sweets among themselves when the first death sentence was declared by ICT. They burst into joy. According to various print and electronic media, News that Mullah had been given a death sentence was greeted with delight in some quarters including at Shahbag. Punishment of war criminals brought happiness in their mind. The family members of 1971 victims get relief from their mental agony.

Economic Rationale of ICT

It is apparently clear from the above discussions that the explicit as well implicit cost of International War Crime Tribunal and its activities on the economy are not returned in cash. Is it a failed project or political decision makers are economically not rational? Off course not. The economic rationale of the ICT lies in the ordinal measures of utility, the satisfaction derived by the supporters of AL and their allies. The psychic benefits and the political advantage over their counterparts are the major returns of the ICT. According to the ordinal school of thought in economics, such return cannot be measured in number, in monetary value. Thus despite all the socio-economic losses mentioned above, the political benefits and the psychic happiness remain at the top.

Conclusion

International war crimes tribunal in Bangladesh has been working since its inception to fulfill the political agenda of the ruling party. Already a top Jamat leader named Qader Mollah has been executed. It was the demand for millions to ensure death sentence of the war criminals while they gathered at Shahbag, one of the busiest intersection of the capital Dhaka. Moreover, the election commitment of Awami League was to bring all the war criminal under the law. Consequently the ICT has been working on the respective duties with full attention. However, the punishment of top Jamat leaders induced violence, death and loss of properties across the country. It is apparent that the sum of explicit and implicit cost of war crimes tribunal is huge. But the cost does not make any significant contribution in the economy positively. The socio-economic losses are not returned in cash. The only political gain and the psychic benefit are accrued in the bag of the AL supporters.

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